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## Is Venezuela's Tren de Aragua 'Invading' the US?

by Venezuela Investigative Unit 1 Apr 2024



Venezuela's Tren de Aragua gang is causing increasing concern in the United States, even though the group appears to have no substantial US presence and looks unlikely to establish one.

US federal lawmakers recently asked President Joe Biden to declare Tren de Aragua a transnational criminal organization, calling the group "an invading criminal army" and claiming the gang's members have spread "brutality and chaos" in the United States.

"It is clear that most state and local law enforcement agencies are not yet prepared to handle the magnitude of this grave threat," the group of nearly two dozen lawmakers, all from the opposition Republican Party, wrote in a [March 14 letter](#).

**SEE ALSO:** [Tren de Aragua: From Prison Gang to Transnational Criminal Enterprise](#)

The request follows a smattering of reports in recent months suggesting the possible presence of Tren de Aragua members in the United States, some with links to isolated crimes.

But the few crimes attributed to alleged Tren de Aragua members in the United States appear to have no connection with the larger group or its leadership in Venezuela. And none of more than a dozen national, state, and local law enforcement agencies contacted by InSight Crime has reported any significant presence of Tren de Aragua.

## Flimsy Ties

Two recent murders with tenuous links to Tren de Aragua attracted Manage consent read media attention and featured prominently in the Republican and letter, though neither killing had any apparent connection to gang

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Two recent murders with tenuous links to Tren de Aragua attracted widespread media attention and featured prominently in the Republican lawmakers' letter, though neither killing had any apparent connection to gang activities.

The most recent was the February 2024 murder of Laken Riley, a university student in the southeastern state of Georgia. Federal prosecutors said in a [court filing](#) that the alleged killer had tattoos, wore clothes, and flashed hand signs that suggested an affiliation with Tren de Aragua, though they did not suggest gang ties motivated the murder. But tattoos are not an identification symbol for Tren de Aragua members, as they are for groups such as the [MS13](#) and [Barrio 18](#).

A search of the powerful CourtLink legal database found no other US criminal cases mentioning Tren de Aragua, either at the state or federal level.

The head of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation's gang task force, Ken Howard, told InSight Crime that relatively little is known about the gang's presence and activities in the United States.

"We know they're here in the state of Georgia," Howard said. "But as far as building out an intelligence database on the group that's well documented and identified, I wouldn't say we're there yet."

Previously, Tren de Aragua was linked to the November 2023 murder of a Venezuelan ex-police officer near Miami. But Detective Alvaro Zabaleta of the Miami-Dade Police Department told InSight Crime that the suspect in that case had denied belonging to the gang, and investigators had found no evidence indicating his membership.

"This individual has knowledge of members of this organization ... But that's all they have," Zabaleta said. "We don't have any crimes that we can say are associated to them."

The Republican lawmakers' letter accused Tren de Aragua of "rapes of multiple children." But InSight Crime could not find any reports of such incidents in the United States, and the main authors of the letter, Sen. Marco Rubio and Rep. María Elvira Salazar, both of Florida, did not respond to requests for comment.

Police agencies in major urban areas across the United States – including Los Angeles, Phoenix, Dallas, San Antonio, and Denver – told InSight Crime that they had no reports of crimes committed by Tren de Aragua in their jurisdictions.

The New York Police Department has told local media outlets that Tren de Aragua is responsible for a series of cell phone robberies in New York City, but the agency did not respond to InSight Crime's requests for comment.

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## Vague Reports

Information about the presence of Tren de Aragua in the United States is limited and vague.

In August 2023, US Border Patrol Chief Jason Owens said on X, formerly Twitter, that his agency had arrested a Tren de Aragua member attempting to enter the United States. A few months later, in November, the Border Patrol [told CNN en Español](#) that the agency had arrested 38 possible Tren de Aragua members between October 2022 and October 2023.

US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) recently announced what appears to be the first apprehension of an alleged Tren de Aragua member away from the border. The arrest happened near Chicago on March 11, 2024 – days before the lawmakers' letter to Biden – though ICE did not announce it publicly until March 25.

It is not clear how ICE verified the suspect's membership in the gang. The Border Patrol, ICE, and their parent agency, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) did not respond to InSight Crime's requests for comment.

A special agent of the US Federal Bureau of Investigation recently [told the New York Post](#) that Tren de Aragua members are entering the United States and potentially teaming up with other gangs like the MS13.

But a spokesperson for the FBI's parent agency, the US Department of Justice, told InSight Crime the agency does not have “any public cases involving Tren de Aragua to provide to you.” The FBI declined InSight Crime's requests for comment.

## Barriers to Entry

Tren de Aragua has successfully expanded beyond Venezuela to establish operations in other South American countries by following and preying off the huge migrant flows generated in recent years by Venezuela's economic and political struggles. But the gang is unlikely to be able to replicate its model in the United States, despite the country's large Venezuelan diaspora communities.

Tren de Aragua lacks control over US migrant smuggling and human trafficking routes. Control of such routes was key to [the gang's expansion](#) in South America. Tren de Aragua's smuggling operations helped build a strong presence in border areas of Colombia and Chile, giving it a base from which to branch out to other crimes with low barriers to entry. From there, the gang

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**SEE ALSO:** [High-Profile Chile Murder Shows Tren de Aragua's Sophistication](#)

But human smuggling and trafficking routes along the US-Mexico border are [dominated by Mexican groups](#), leaving little room for Tren de Aragua to establish a foothold.

Similarly, Tren de Aragua would likely struggle to break into other criminal markets in the United States, many of which are controlled by well established gangs. The lack of criminal competitors was decisive in Tren de Aragua's ability to expand into Chile, whereas it has had less success in Ecuador's more competitive criminal landscape.

While Tren de Aragua appears unlikely to make substantial inroads in the United States, inflating the threat posed by the gang could encourage imposters. This phenomenon has occurred in countries [throughout Latin America](#) as the gang's reputation has grown.

Zabaleta, the Miami-Dade detective, said his agency is wary of stoking unnecessary fear about the group.

"It gives them notoriety, it gives them credibility, it makes them grow," he said. "You start to create that panic and that noise on something that perhaps is not even there."

*Featured Image: Image from a Fox News broadcast showing a map of the alleged migration of Tren de Aragua to the United States. Credit: Fox News*

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